

DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH:
SECOND PIANO SONATA

BY

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Submitted to the faculty of the
Jacobs School of Music in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree,
Doctor of Music
Indiana University
May 2017

Accepted by the faculty of the
Indiana University Jacobs School of Music,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Music

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Introduction

Shostakovich's *Second Piano Sonata* was inspired by tragic events of the composer's personal life as well as the appalling circumstances that marked that period of Russian history. The purpose of this study is to attempt to describe, summarize, characterize, and analyze these events and ways in which they influenced the creation of this work. As points of departure, the paper recounts the universal horrors of World War II, the professional distresses of the witch hunt to which Shostakovich was subjected following the *Pravda* article "Muddle instead of music," and the deeply personal attachment Shostakovich had developed towards his teacher Leonid Nikolayev, to whose memory he dedicated this sonata. The study then goes on to consider aspects of Shostakovich's pianism, style, and language, and delves deeper into the music of the sonata in order to provide a detailed road-map through this highly complex piece for both performer and listener.

Chapter One

The Germans Attack

On June 22, 1941, German troops invaded the Soviet Union. This came as a shock to the Soviet authorities and, personally, to Stalin. Two years prior, the signing of the Soviet-Nazi Non-Aggression pact was hailed as the pinnacle of Soviet diplomacy; the sense of security it had created was now proven false. Meanwhile, Stalin's purges among the higher ranking military officers in 1937-41¹ and the ongoing reform of the armed force left the country unprepared for a defensive war. The German troops advanced deep into Soviet territory with minimal effort and losses. By the end of August of 1941, they had encircled Shostakovich's home city of Leningrad. This began the historic siege of the city. It would go on to last for 872 days; the bombings, the hunger, and other strife would claim more than a million lives.

The beginning of the war found Shostakovich working at the Leningrad Conservatory, where he was giving final examinations to students seeking to graduate from his composition class. Shostakovich immediately tried to enlist as a volunteer, but his attempt to serve at the front line was declined due to his extremely poor eyesight.² He worked in the service brigades, which were tasked with digging trenches and building anti-tank barriers. His longest stint was as a firefighter. One of his most famous photographs is a shot of him holding a fire-hose while on the roof of the Conservatory. An important symbol of the city's resistance, this image was printed in all the Soviet

¹ The number of the military commanders summarily executed or sent to the camps of the Gulag is staggering. Famously, three of the five Marshals (highest rank under that of Commander-in-chief), were shot between 1937 and 1939.

² Krzysztof Meyer, *Schostakowitsch: Sein Leben, Sein Werk, Seine Zeit* [Shostakovich: *His Life, His Work, His Time*], transl. (from German to Russian) Ye. Gulyayeva (St. Petersburg: DSCH, Kompozitor, 1998), 234.

newspapers and found its way abroad.³ In order to help the war effort Shostakovich also made song arrangements for concert brigades to perform for the troops at the front line.⁴ He arranged twenty seven operatic arias as well as some art songs, *romansy*,⁵ and popular songs, mostly for chamber ensembles.



Figure 1.1. Shostakovich on the Cover of *Time*.⁶

Meanwhile, the situation in Leningrad became dire. All of the city's provisions were stockpiled in one location—a tremendous blunder by the management—and,

³ The famous *Time* magazine cover from July 20, 1942 (see below) was a variation on this theme.

⁴ The “concert brigades” performed for the troops near the frontlines as well as away from the action. They came to occupy a role similar to that of the shows put together by the United Service Organizations for American troops. Virtually every important performer (folk, popular, and classical alike) – actor, musician, dancer, etc. – took part.

⁵ The *Romanse* (pl., *Romansy*), is a cross-over genre, a hybrid of the art song and the popular song. It gained popularity in the 19th century. *Romansy* composed by professionals such as Glinka and Bulakhov, and semi-amateurs, like Aliabiev, and Gurilev, still occupy a very important place in the culture and have retained popularity for well over a century.

⁶ Available from <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19420720,00.html>, accessed January 10, 2016. Photo credit: Boris Artzybasheff.

following a successful bombing raid by the Nazi *Luftwaffe*, the besieged city was on the verge of starvation. In October of 1941 the authorities decided to evacuate Shostakovich and his family from Leningrad—evacuation became a standard practice for the political and cultural elite. After a two-week stay in Moscow, the Shostakoviches were put on a train to Sverdlovsk (present-day Yekaterinburg), a city in the Ural Mountains, far from the front lines. However, Shostakovich and his family never made it to Sverdlovsk and decided to settle in Kuibyshev (present-day Samara), on the Volga river, rather than continue the hellish journey any further.

The Seventh Symphony

After the initial shock and confusion of the beginning of the war had given way to more stratified and measured emotional responses, Shostakovich set about composing a new serious work, which later became his *Seventh Symphony*, op. 60. His initial idea was to write a one-movement work, with a possible choral conclusion, but it grew into a more traditional four-movement symphonic cycle. The work progressed quickly as the grandiose first movement was composed in less than six weeks, while the next two movements were finished less than three weeks after. The *Seventh Symphony* was completed in December of 1941 and was triumphantly premiered in Kuibyshev on March 5, 1942,⁷ by the members of the Bolshoi Theatre Orchestra conducted by Samuil Samosud.⁸ By the end of the month, the symphony was performed in Moscow and soon

⁷ Meyer, 240.

⁸ Samuil Abramovich Samosud (1884-1964) was one of the pre-eminent Soviet conductors. He had a checkered history with Shostakovich, who valued his professionalism, but could not forgive him for his failure to stand by his musical and personal principles in the face of pressure from the authorities. Having premiered and championed *Lady Macbeth* at the outset, Samosud joined the critics when the tables turned on the composer (see below). Samosud took the same course of action with Prokofiev's *War and Peace*.

performances in other major cities followed. Henry Wood performed it in London on June 22nd (ironically, exactly a year after the day of Hitler's invasion of Russia) and a month later Toscanini gave the American premiere in New York.

The most significant, indeed iconic, performance of this monumental work was given in the besieged Leningrad by the Radio Orchestra under Karl Eliasberg. The Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra was evacuated to Novosibirsk and the Radio Orchestra was the only ensemble which remained in the city. The hunger and the unusually bitter cold of the winter of 1941-42 reduced the number of musicians in the orchestra to fourteen. Eliasberg applied a herculean effort in recruiting more players among retired musicians, and soldiers with musical training were released from duties in order to reinforce the orchestra for this incredibly important performance. The creation of a full symphonic orchestra in the city dying of hunger was an amazing feat of determination, courage and perseverance. The performance of the *Seventh Symphony* inspired the outside world and became yet another symbol of the city's bravery.

Chapter Two

“Muddle...”

The Shostakovich family soon settled into a somewhat normal way life in Kuibyshev and their new home became a meeting place for the intelligentsia evacuated from Moscow and Leningrad. Shostakovich returned to composing as soon as the conditions allowed it, and worked on several major works simultaneously. Along with the *Seventh Symphony*, he wrote a portion of music for his unfinished opera *The Gamblers*, based on a play by Nikolai Gogol. He also composed the *Six Romances on Verses by English Poets*, Op. 62, and his *Second Piano Sonata*.

When addressing Shostakovich’s predilection for instrumental genres⁹ during this period, one event in the composer’s life looms large, and, although it is well-known and oft-described, its “elephant-in-the-room” status makes it crucial in the context of this essay as well. The current year marks the 80th anniversary of the day (January 28, 1936) on which the leading Soviet periodical *Pravda* ran the infamous article titled “Muddle instead of music.” While Shostakovich was hardly spared the commonplace tribulations that befell any Soviet citizen pre-1936, this publication specifically and categorically marked the beginning of the composer’s personalized (!) artistic oppression, private misfortunes, and, consequently, tortured psychology.

“Muddle” was published as an unsigned editorial article, although it is widely believed¹⁰ that the text was directly authorized by Stalin himself,¹¹ following his visit to

⁹ *The Gamblers* notwithstanding, although the opera remained unfinished, further solidifying the point at hand.

¹⁰ For an exemplary analysis, see Simon Morrison, *The People’s Artist: Prokofiev’s Soviet Years* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 40.

¹¹ It’s difficult to imagine that *ANY* article which appeared on the front page of *Pravda* would not have been authorized by the great Father of the People, but, in this case, his personal interest and involvement is

the Bolshoi Theater, where he attended a performance of Shostakovich's already very successful opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. The article appeared on the front page, which in itself, is a bizarre victory for all music criticism and cultural news in general.¹² This was a severe indictment of the opera; it sealed Shostakovich's fate and, in many respects, shaped his career and artistic output. While it is truly a difficult task to get past the staggering propaganda, the article does lend itself to some objective analysis. The text takes a stratified approach: on the surface are the author's impressions of and reactions to the *production* (choice of subject, dramatic action, acting, sets, etc.); less obvious is the highly emotional and somewhat volatile response to the *music* itself. Thus, the article catalogues the opera's faults on a variety of fronts: from the overt and ostentatious eroticism to the abundance of complex rhythms and the lack of singable, simple melodies.

Certain theatres are presenting to the new culturally mature Soviet public Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth* as an innovation and achievement. Musical criticism, always ready to serve, has praised the opera to high heavens, and given it resounding glory. The young composer, instead of hearing serious criticism, which could have helped him in his future work, hears only enthusiastic compliments. From the first minute, the listener is shocked by deliberate dissonance, by a confused stream of sound. Snatches of melody, the beginnings of a musical phrase, are drowned, emerge again, and disappear in a grinding and squealing roar. To follow this "music" is most difficult; to remember it, impossible. Thus it goes, practically throughout the entire opera. The singing on the stage is replaced by shrieks. If the composer chances to come upon the path of a clear and simple melody, he throws himself back into a wilderness of musical chaos, in places becoming cacophony. The expression which the listener expects is supplanted by wild rhythm. Passion is here supposed to be expressed by noise. All this is not due to lack of talent, or lack of ability to depict strong and simple emotions in music. Here is music turned deliberately inside out in order that nothing will be reminiscent of classical opera, or have anything in common with

evident to have played an important role. The specific text is likely to have been penned by David Zaslavsky, one of *Pravda's* ideological editors and a profoundly interesting character in his own right.

¹² For the sake of comparison, consider the circumstances of Van Cliburn's legendary victory at the inaugural Tchaikovsky Competition in 1958: a ticker tape parade and all, but the *New York Times* article announcing the spectacular news ran on page 37!

symphonic music or with simple and popular musical language accessible to all. This music is built on the basis of rejecting opera.¹³

Theoretical and political implications of this shattering criticism were even more serious. Shostakovich's opera was accused simultaneously of formalism¹⁴ and naturalism. The article pointed to the "dangers" of works such as *Lady Macbeth* to the path of the development for Soviet music.

Here we have Leftist¹⁵ confusion instead of natural human music. The power of good music to excite the masses has been sacrificed to a petty-bourgeois, "formalist" attempt to create originality through cheap clowning. It is a game of clever ingenuity that may end very badly... The danger of this trend to Soviet music is clear. Leftist distortion in opera stems from the same source as Leftist distortion in painting, poetry, education, and science. Petty-bourgeois "innovations" lead to a break with real art, real science and real literature... The composer apparently never considered the problem of what the Soviet audience looks for and expects in music. As though deliberately, he scribbles down his music, confusing all the sounds in such a way that his music would reach only the effete "formalists" who had lost all their wholesome taste. He ignored the demand of Soviet culture that all coarseness and savagery be abolished from every corner of Soviet life. Some critics call this glorification of the merchants' lust a satire. But there is no question of satire here. The composer has tried, with all the musical and dramatic means at his command, to arouse the sympathy of the spectators for the coarse and vulgar inclinations and behavior of the merchant woman Katerina Ismailova.¹⁶

The significance of "Muddle..." for both Shostakovich's personal and artistic life cannot be overestimated. Nor was this the end of the attack. Barely a week after, on

¹³ The original Russian text is available from a variety of sources, e.g., accessed January 10, 2016, <http://asmir.info/lib/sovok/sumbur.htm>; the English translation is mine.

¹⁴ No satisfactory contemporaneous definition of this term can be found. What can be gleaned from all the passing references going back to the hey-day of the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM) in the 1920s down to the official decrees of the 1940s, Formalism became an umbrella term for anything the ruling apparatus found undesirable and tended to focus on the personalities to be denounced rather than clearly identifiable traits. The aesthetic principles were as dynamic as the political agenda required. Hence, Formalism was more likely to be defined in terms it was *NOT*, rather than what it *was*: the approved cultural credo was Socialist Realism, and anything that failed to adhere to it could be denounced as Formalist.

¹⁵ Another amorphous, hence multi-purpose, derogatory term. It came from the same turbulent currents at RAPM (see above) and its literary counterpart, RAPP, was later used to denounce the very same organizations that coined them, and, with all its original meaning completely lost, stuck around well into the 1960s.

¹⁶ See note 13 above.

February 6, 1936, *Pravda* ran another unsigned editorial titled “Ballet falseness,” which attacked Shostakovich’s also heretofore popular ballet *Limpid Stream*. Historically, this article has received less attention, partly due to the fact that it merely regurgitates the same sort of arguments that appeared in its predecessor, although with even greater focus on the ideological faults of the ballet’s scenario. What was of the greatest practical significance for Shostakovich was that “Ballet falseness” banned him from another whole genre, thus effectively cutting him off from all large-scale works for the theater. In many respects his life divides into two periods—before the *Pravda* articles and after.

Shostakovich’s aversion to opera and ballet, his shift towards textless and pure genres such as symphony, string quartet, and instrumental sonata, and miniature grew out of the psychological trauma that followed the sheer terror of being the target of Stalin’s direct indignation and criticism. Shostakovich stopped making public appearances and statements after these events; he had to learn how to compromise his artistic integrity and invent a somewhat Aesopian, allegorical language in order to be able to say in his music what he intended to say, while avoiding trouble.

Just a couple of weeks after the articles, in February of 1936, Shostakovich finished a concert tour in Archangelsk, but he returned to Moscow and not to his home city of Leningrad. In a short letter to his closest friend, Ivan Sollertinsky, which dates from this stay in Moscow, he plays the stoic:

I live quietly in Moscow. Almost the whole time I stay in my apartment, just waiting for the phone to ring. I have very little hope that I will be seen, but I hope nonetheless. I don’t see anyone. Once in a while Shebalin [see below] stops by. There was an article in the magazine *Soviet Art*, which mentioned the discussion at the House of Cinematographers. It said that the continuation of the dispute is scheduled for the March 3rd and I, among others, am signed up. This is very strange for me to hear. I have not been to the House of Cinematographers a single time in my life, hence I certainly could not sign myself up for any dispute there.

Also, I accidentally gained a great enemy in Professor Golovanov (the conductor).¹⁷ The thing is that I happened to be at the rehearsal of the opera *Quiet Flows the Don*¹⁸ and participated in the discussion afterwards. I strongly criticized Professor Golovanov and he became quite hysterical in his reaction. I decided not to wait till he gets a grip on himself and left before the end of the discussion. That was the only “interesting” thing that has happened during all this time in Moscow. Otherwise I just sit at home and wait.¹⁹

Judging by the context of this letter, Shostakovich unsuccessfully tried to get an audience at the Kremlin with Stalin. He was never seen by the dictator, because Stalin’s reaction to appears to have been was extremely personal and volatile. The letter also provides a glimpse of the desperate situation in which the composer found himself: all of his erstwhile friends were forced to either openly oppose him or, at the very least, quietly distance themselves. The only exception was a fellow composer, Vissarion Shebalin,²⁰ who had been a faithful friend all along.

Friends

The events of January-February of 1936 were pivotal. The terror of being a target of Stalin’s personal attack shaped Shostakovich’s psyche for the rest of his personal and artistic life. He was shaken and suffered tremendous psychological consequences. As

¹⁷ Nikolai Golovanov (1891-1953) was one of the most prominent Soviet conductors, best known for working at the Bolshoi Theater. Also a composer of some note, Golovanov was married to the great soprano Antonina Nezhdanova, nearly twenty years his senior.

¹⁸ One of Stalin’s favorite novels, Mikhail Sholokhov’s *Quiet Flows the Don*, won the author the Nobel Prize in literature and gave rise to a bevy of stage works and films. The work in question, Ivan Dzerzhinsky’s opera, was very popular during the Soviet period, but has all but disappeared in the recent decades.

¹⁹ Dmitry Shostakovich, *Pis'ma I.I. Sollertinskomu* [*Letters to I.I. Sollertinsky*] (St. Petersburg: Kompozitor, 2006), 188.

²⁰ Vissarion Shebalin (1902-1963) was an important composer of a variety of works of strong musical quality. He was a highly conscientious and well-liked Director of the Moscow Conservatory until the Zhdanov Anti-Formalist campaign of 1948, when he lost his title and proudly (!) occupied a spot on the black list of composers, immediately following the names of Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Khachaturian, and Myaskovsky. Shebalin was an especially influential teacher of composition and brought up several generations of composers.

suggested above, Shostakovich's turn towards the symphony, string quartet and instrumental sonata in many respects was stipulated by the first denunciation of 1936. Therefore, it was not surprising that in order to process his grief after the devastating losses of closest friends, such as Nikolayev and Sollertinsky, Shostakovich turned to purely instrumental genres of the piano sonata and piano trio respectively.

All of the pieces on which Shostakovich was working during the time of his evacuation to Kuibyshev were inspired by friendships and close relationships. *Six Romances*, op. 62, were conceived as secret personal messages and dedications to group of people he considered very close friends: Levon Atovmyan, Ivan Sollertinsky, and Isaak Glikman. He used poetry by English poets in masterful translations by Boris Pasternak²¹ and Samuil Marshak. Edward Elgar's *Enigma Variations* may well have been an inspiration.

Levon Atovmyan (1901-1973) was the adoptive son of the cellist Vassily Kubatsky, the latter being a frequent chamber partner of Shostakovich's and the dedicatee of the *Cello Sonata*, op. 40. Having studied music to a rather serious extent, Atovmyan chose to seek a career in what was the Soviet society offered as the closest thing to music management. An important asset in all manners practical (booking concerts, drafting contracts, procuring commodities, etc.) to all of the best musicians, and, especially the composers Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and Khachaturian, Atovmyan ran Muzfond, or Muzykal'nyi Fond SSSR (The Musical Fund of the USSR), which was an umbrella organization created to support and fund all musical activities from publication

²¹ The Nobel Laureate and author of *Doctor Zhivago*, was one of the most important poets of the 20th century. What is less known outside the Russian-speaking world, is the plethora of true masterpieces he produced as translator; his crowning achievements were translations of Shakespeare.

to publicity and performances; since its inception in 1939, it was headed by Atovmyan. After the infamous Zhdnov decrees of 1948, Atovmyan narrowly escaped imprisonment, but was able to recover much of his influence in a matter of a few years, and thus, remained a very important ally to Shostakovich during the composer's whole life.

Shostakovich's closest friend was the amazing polymath Ivan Sollertinsky (1902-1944): an expert in theatre and Romance languages, a polyglot, who spoke 26 languages and 100 dialects, musicologist, lecturer, scholar of ballet, the theater, and literature, prominent musical critic, professor at the Leningrad Conservatory and Artistic Director of the Leningrad Philharmonic. In many respects, Sollertinsky was Shostakovich's mentor as well as a confidant and the addressee of a collection of very open and intimate letters published nowadays. His sudden death was a particularly heavy blow to the composer and prompted the composition of the *Piano Trio in E minor*, op. 67, one of Shostakovich most popular yet personal works. One of Sollertinsky's students, Isaak Glikman (1911-2003), a dazzling polymath in his own right, but primarily known as a literary critic, dramatist and librettist, partially filled the void. Glikman's correspondence with Shostakovich spanned decades and is a treasure trove of insights into the composer's life, psyche, and aesthetics.

At the end of 1942 Shostakovich planned to start working on a very special piece: a piano sonata dedicated to the memory of yet another departed friend, his piano professor at the Petrograd Conservatory, Leonid Nikolayev.

Chapter Three

Nikolayev

There is rather little available information on Leonid Vladimirovich Nikolayev (1878-1942). This is especially surprising considering the great impact that Nikolayev had on the development of Russian/Soviet pianistic tradition and the number of illustrious pianists he nourished during his teaching career in Kiev and especially at the Petrograd/Leningrad Conservatory. Among his students were such giants as Vladimir Sofronitsky (1901-1961) and Maria Yudina (1899-1970), and, of course, Shostakovich. Nikolayev's aesthetic system is at the core of Russian/Soviet school of pianism. The central idea was the focus on tone; tone of the highest quality—that *correct, desired* sound—was the driving force behind technique. Limitless expressiveness and emotional involvement were the main goals. These were chief principles for Nikolayev, both as pianist and composer. For Shostakovich, this was an immense influence, which too became part of his code as both pianist and composer for the rest of his life and career.

One of the few extended sources of information on Nikolayev is the biography/study of his teaching method and compositional style by one of his students – Samariy Savshinsky (1891-1968), himself an important pianist, pedagogue, essayist,²² and long-time professor at the Leningrad Conservatory.²³ Sadly, Savshinsky's work has not been translated to English. The following brief sketch is largely based on his volume dedicated to Nikolayev and published in 1950.

²² Savshinsky wrote a number of practical and highly popular books on the craft of piano playing; his most famous work, *Pianist i Yego Rabota* [*The Pianist and His Work*], first published in 1961, is widely read and still in print.

²³ Savshinsky reworked his 1950 publication on Nikolayev and published another version in 1960; the differences mostly reflect the political changes that took place in the USSR 1960 (importantly, this was *after* Stalin's death in 1953) and are minimal with respect to Nikolayev's biography and aesthetics.

Born in 1878, Leonid Nikolayev was the youngest son of a noted architect, whose home in Kiev was a center of cultural life for the city's intelligentsia and a regular concert venue for local and visiting musicians. Hence, from early on, Leonid was immersed in a musical atmosphere. He had all the makings of a prodigy: just listening to his brother practicing piano, the five-year-old Leonid learned all of his brother's repertoire by ear and by watching his hands, and amazed his parents by playing all of it one day. They immediately started him with piano lessons with the best and most prominent piano teachers in Kiev. His first teacher was Mme. Svarcheskaya, who applied great care and skill in nurturing the young boy's talent. After studying with her for a few years Leonid was admitted to the Kiev Music College, known for providing well-structured formal musical education. Nikolayev was admitted to both the piano performance and the composition department, as he was extremely interested and gifted in both. He studied piano with the epochal Professor Vladimir Pukhalsky (1848-1933), a student of the great Theodore Leschetitzky, and a highly influential teacher, whose roster of students included the young Vladimir Horowitz, along with his sister Regina (a great pianist and teacher in her own right), Grigory Kogan (long-time professor at the Moscow Conservatory), Julius Isserlis (great pianist, teacher, and grandfather of cellist Steven Isserlis), Anna Artobolevskaya (arguably, the most important Russian/Soviet teacher of beginning piano), and Boleslav Yavorsky (one of the most important music theorists of the first half of the 20th century). Nikolayev also studied composition with Eugeniusz Ryb (1859-1924), a composition student of Rimsky-Korskov, and a violin student of the great Leopold Auer. Nikolayev, then just thirteen, quickly became one of his school's brightest stars and was introduced to Tchaikovsky and Anton Rubinstein. Rubinstein

praised his performance of Nikolayev's own *Piano Variations*, while Tchaikovsky found his first attempt at an opera—*Manfred*, after the Byron poem—highly impressive.

At fourteen, Leonid Nikolayev became a prominent figure among musicians and a frequent performer at the most prestigious musical venues in Kiev. In addition, many of his compositions became part of the repertoire for many soloists and ensembles. Such works as his *Spanish Dance* from an orchestral suite, his orchestral *Serenade* and *Minuet* were favorites with the public. Unfortunately, none of these works survived. In 1897, Nikolayev graduated from the Music College and went on to the Moscow Conservatory in order to study with its most illustrious professors: piano with Vassily Safonov (1852-1918) and composition with Sergei Taneyev (1856-1915). Safonov was the Conservatory's director and also an important conductor. Among his students were such prominent pianists and composers as Alexander Scriabin, Joseph and Rosina Lhevinne, Nikolai Medtner, and Alexander Goedicke. Taneyev was simply the most important teacher of composition Moscow had ever had (only St. Petersburg's Rimsky-Korsakov may have had a greater impact). While at the Conservatory, Nikolayev earned the respect of his fellow students and made friends with the faculty. He graduated from the Conservatory in 1903 and was awarded the highest honor available for graduating students—the Great Gold Medal, given only to students who distinguished themselves both as solo performers and as composers. In addition to his Moscow Conservatory education, in 1904 Nikolayev graduated from the Kiev State University with a law degree.

Nikolayev's career had a brilliant start: he became the orchestra pianist at the Bolshoi Theatre and was invited to teach at the Musical College of the Moscow

Philharmonic Society (second in status only to the Conservatory). While in Moscow, Nikolayev wrote and published his first fourteen opuses as composer. Among them were his most famous works—*Sonata for Violin and Piano* and *Suite for Two Pianos*. Nikolayev's fame as a composer, teacher and pianist attracted the attention of Alexander Glazunov (1865-1936), who then served as the Director of the Saint-Petersburg Conservatory. The school was in the middle of a generational shift and Glazunov was eager to hire a promising young musician away from Moscow. Nikolayev's first appointment in 1909 was as senior lecturer and, after several pianists in his first graduating piano class were awarded several silver medals, he was promoted to full professor. Nikolayev's reputation as the best piano pedagogue at the Petrograd conservatory was well-deserved. A musician of profound education and simply a very charismatic person, he combined the deep intuition of a respected mentor to young musicians with the vast experience of a virtuoso performer, seasoned conductor, and gifted composer.

Shostakovich and His Teacher

Shostakovich studied under Professor Nikolayev from 1920 until his graduation from the conservatory in 1923. Their friendship and collaboration continued for many years beyond graduation. Nikolayev played a great role in Shostakovich's education as a composer, although officially his composition teacher was Maximilian Steinberg,²⁴ with whom he had a much more superficial contact. Shostakovich wrote, "I studied piano with an outstanding teacher and first-rate musician. It is unfortunate that he—a student of Taneyev—did not teach composition as well. I showed him my compositions and always got the most valuable advice and instructions from him.... [This advice] was distinguished by Nikolayev's subtle sense of form and style, and his impeccable taste."²⁵ Nikolayev showed great interest in his young and most talented student's compositions. In turn, Shostakovich not only knew Nikolayev's works, but also took part in public performances of at least one of them, *Variations on a Four-Note Theme* for two pianos. Shostakovich considered Nikolayev a remarkable teacher of composition and thought that he learned as a composer a great deal *more* from him, than he learned as pianist. Iosif Shvarts, Shostakovich's classmate and the future dedicatee of Shostakovich's *Fantastic Dances*, wrote about Shostakovich's audition to Nikolayev's class, "He played the Grieg Concerto for Nikolayev. Then, Shostakovich performed his own piano pieces, and Nikolayev immediately realized that, before him was an astonishing talent."²⁶ Also according to Shvarts,

²⁴ Maximilian Steinberg (1883-1946) was an important student and, later, son-in-law of Rimsky-Korsakov, whom the maître held in higher regard than Stravinsky, much to the latter's dismay. Steinberg never did develop into a composer of especial note, and his main contribution was that as a teacher.

²⁵ Manashir Yakubov, "Sonata no. 2 dly royalya D.D. Shostakovicha" ["Sonata no. 2 for piano by D.D. Shostakovich"], foreword to the 1999 addition of the score (Moscow: DSCH, 1999), 1.

²⁶ Sofia Mosheovich, *Dmitri Shostakovich, Pianist* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 18.

In his early lessons with Shostakovich, Nikolayev initially paid particular attention to the study of polyphonic compositions. Among the first major pieces given to Shostakovich was Schumann's *Faschingsschwank*. A year and a half later, in the spring of 1922, Shostakovich played the *Hammerklavier*, Beethoven's Sonata no. 29, at Nikolayev's studio recital in the Maly Hall. He was only fifteen years old! I remember one of the musicians sitting beside me asked: "What if he forgets something in the fugue?" To this, I answered that Shostakovich, although still young, was a great musician, and that nothing of the sort could ever happen to him. He played superbly, indeed, with an amazing grasp of the work's grandiose concept, a rhythmic will of steel, and the most profound lyrical insight.²⁷

One could say that during Shostakovich's early years, his style as a pianist—original and idiosyncratic as it was—evolved simultaneously with, and complemented his development as a composer. His tone production was always typical—decisive and tenacious—containing within itself a clearly defined rhythmic momentum and at the same time, possessing a great variety of expressive shadings. The components of both genre and characterization were as evident in his manner as they were in his music; in his performances and his compositions, these elements not so much brought out tone color and painting, as created a psychological portraits.²⁸

In Nikolayev's class, the young Shostakovich was surrounded by bright stars, including Vladimir Sofronitsky and Maria Yudina, and he undoubtedly was inspired by their pianism. An impressionable youth, he tried to imitate Yudina's very personal and idiosyncratic interpretations—something Nikolayev strongly discouraged. One of Nikolayev's pedagogical fortes was his ability to discern his students' diverse abilities and encourage their individual developments as musicians. Nikolayev's interest and concern with the young composer's work reinforced their relationship and created a

²⁷ Ibid., 19.

²⁸ Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, (2d ed., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 41.

foundation for a lifelong friendship. Being an individual and a composer of a profoundly analytical nature, Nikolayev was able to instill in Shostakovich a clear understanding and appreciation of musical form. His advice and suggestions on the structure and harmony of Shostakovich's new compositions were invaluable.

Shostakovich, the Pianist

Although his significance as one of the greatest composers of the 20th century certainly overshadows his pianistic career, Shostakovich was an outstanding pianist, one of the best of his generation and a true representative of Russian/Soviet school. By his early twenties Shostakovich was a well-known pianist, but he never managed to get an extensive performing career overseas. A part of the reason was that he was born a bit too late for having been able to achieve international fame as a pianist before the Russian Revolution of 1917. The brightest stars to have come from the same generation, pianist Vladimir Horowitz and violinist Nathan Milstein, had to leave Russia in order to achieve success as performers. Nonetheless, Shostakovich participated in the First International Chopin Competition in Warsaw in 1927, where he won a diploma. He went on a tour of Turkey in 1935, and then trips to Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and France in 1947 and 1958. These tours were insufficient to establish an international pianistic career for him; nevertheless, Shostakovich's experience as a performing pianist had a great impact on his life as a composer. Until the 1930s, Shostakovich concertized in Russia and Europe with varied solo and chamber repertoire. After 1933 he, however, limited his repertoire to his own compositions. Shostakovich continued to make appearances as a solo pianist and chamber musician until 1966, when his illness left his hands disabled.

A great number of Shostakovich's recordings exists. These recordings include both his piano concertos, *Concertino for Two Pianos*, op. 94, seventeen *Preludes and Fugues* from op. 87, the sonatas for cello, and violin, opp. 40 and 134, respectively, the *Piano Quintet*, Op. 57, the *Second Piano Trio*, Op.67, the song cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry*, and the piano arrangement of *Symphony No. 10*. Moreover, he recorded some of his compositions several times. It is necessary to note that a number of these were made when the composer was well past his prime as a performing pianist. As such, there are certain imperfections, such as wrong notes as well as a certain predilection towards rushing and somewhat exaggerated tempi in general (especially for faster moving music). However, the composer's sense of the unfolding of the form, the architecture, overall pacing, as well as specific attention to sound, are absolutely invaluable insights into the music of each of the pieces he recorded as well as an important source of information on his pianistic and generally musical aesthetics.

Chapter Four

Sonata for Nikolayev

Nikolayev died in Tashkent (capital of present-day Uzbekistan), in October 1942, after being evacuated from Leningrad as the German troops had laid siege to the city. Without a doubt, Shostakovich learned about his death very soon afterwards, so the idea to compose a piano sonata in memory of his teacher was conceived around that time, at the end of the month. At the time, Shostakovich himself had been evacuated, but to Kuibyshev, far enough East and far enough away from the frontline to have become the provisional capital for a short while. The initial idea was to compose a sonata in C sharp minor. An extended rough draft of three full pages exists. It bears the inscription “Dmitry Shostakovich, Op. 63 [*sic*], Sonata No. 2 for Piano.”²⁹ However in the final manuscript of the sonata the material of the draft was not used.

At the beginning of 1943 Shostakovich himself fell seriously ill with typhoid fever and it is known that he began the composition of the final draft of the sonata during the time of his illness. On February 12, Shostakovich wrote to his greatest friend, Ivan Sollertinsky, “When the pain abandoned me I started outlining a piano sonata. I have outlined it, and now little by little, am writing it.”³⁰

After a week he wrote to him again, “When I was sick I composed the first movement of a piano sonata, I am starting the second... Leva [the pianist Lev Oborin]³¹ approved of the first movement yesterday and suggested that I erase an unnecessary page,

²⁹ Yakubov, 4.

³⁰ *Letters to I.I. Sollertinsky*, 248-49.

³¹ Lev Oborin (1907-1974) – pianist and life-long friend of Shostakovich’s. Oborin won that very same Chopin Competition at which Shostakovich also appeared, and, later, became an important professor at the Moscow Conservatory, where he taught, among others, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Boris Berman, and Mihail Voskresensky.

which I did. As a musician he is brilliant. He noticed and corrected the weak spots which tortured my conscience immediately.”³²

In the final draft, at the end of the first movement, the date and the place of composition is indicated as Kuibyshev, February 18th, 1943. The next day Shostakovich wrote to his friend and fellow composer Vissarion Shebalin,³³ “I’ve recovered... I am working a little bit. Having left *The Gamblers* I started a piano sonata and I have already written the first movement. It’s going to be in four movements.”³⁴

He completed the work in a month. However, in its finished form the sonata consists of three movements. It is plausible that the initial idea was to compose an additional movement consisting of a fugue. This is suggested by a copy of the rough draft of the Prelude and Fugue in C sharp minor from the *Twenty-four Preludes and Fugues*, Op. 87. This draft was placed in the same archival file that consists of the rough draft of the three pages in C sharp minor (mentioned above). The second movement was finished on March 3, 1943, as is marked on the final draft, and the finale on March 17.

Shostakovich performed the sonata for the Arts Committee on April 12. In Soviet procedure, the Arts Committee was a government-appointed body, selected specifically for *every* work of art and consisting of a mixture of professionals, government bureaucrats as well as creatures belonging to both worlds. It was to review the work in question and to render a decision as to whether the work would be admitted for publication, performance, etc. Several days after the performance for the Arts Committee, Shostakovich presented the sonata at the House of Composers in Moscow, at a gathering

³² *Letters to I.I. Sollertinsky*, 249-50.

³³ See note 20 above.

³⁴ Yakubov, 4.

of colleagues (again, standard protocol). In her diary, the poetess Marietta Shaginyan (1888-1982) records her conversation with Shostakovich, “The sonata I wrote is a trifle, something impromptu. I am pulled towards the symphony, I want to write my eighth symphony.”³⁵ It is clear that in comparison to the monumental *Seventh Symphony* and to the grandiose idea of the *Eighth*, this sonata could seem like a “trifle,” especially to a composer inclined to severe self-criticism. On June 6th, 1943, Shostakovich gave the public premiere in the Small Hall of the Moscow Conservatory. In the same month, the sonata was approved for publication and was issued in the autumn of the same year.

The eminent pianist Emil Gilels deemed this work among the “outstanding new piano works.”³⁶ Sollertinsky, who most likely listened to the sonata in September, during Shostakovich’s performance in Moscow, reacted with excitement and amazement. In his letter he wrote “I was most impressed with his *Second Piano Sonata*, likely one of his best works (far superior to the rest of his piano music).”³⁷ However, Sollertinsky was not able to write and print a review of the work, because he himself died suddenly three months later.

In September 1943 the sonata was premiered in England and in the United States by the pianist Vera Brodsky Lawrence.³⁸ Reactions were very different. The critic Henry Simond wrote

In one respect the Sonata is exactly what can be expected from a country caught in the war. It is economically written—there are no unnecessary notes that exist solely for the sake of sonority; the music is emaciated, serious, almost hungry. It

³⁵ Marietta Shaginyan, “50 Pisem Shostakovicha” [“50 Letters from Shostakovich”] (*Novy Mir* 12, 1982), 133.

³⁶ Yakubov, 5.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Vera Brodsky Lawrence (1909-1996) was a pianist, editor and historian of American music whose research helped bring the works of Scott Joplin and Louis Moreau Gottschalk to the attention of contemporary performers. Born in Norfolk, Va., she studied with Josef and Rosina Lhevinne and went on to teach at both the Juilliard School and the Curtis Institute of Music.

is possible that it will not have great success among virtuosos. One can cause unusual and even shocking impressions by the passages with alternate theme-fragments sounded in different registers of the piano; one can produce a tense, pensive atmosphere by repeating a couple of chords in the bass; the finale's Theme with Variations can sound like Schubert's *The Trout*, and yet all this will not have any superficial, showy effect. This is uncompromising, serious music, crystal clear, unembellished, melodically and harmonically extremely typical of Shostakovich who is not inclined to make musical jokes during war time.³⁹

Style and Language

As is the case with so many composers, Shostakovich's musical output can be divided into three major periods: early, middle and late. What makes Shostakovich's case non-trivial is that the stylistic fault lines which invite the decision to observe these divisions have a special provenance: rather than a natural evolution of the creator's psyche, nor a certain sequence of personal life events, which are normal causes for such shifts, the changes in Shostakovich's musical choices were rather sharp and precipitous, because they were necessitated by specific changes in political pressure. The early or somewhat avant-garde period spans from 1919 (the year of his first composition) to approximately 1936 (the year of his *Fourth* and *Fifth Symphonies*). Again, as it is often the case, the early period is characterized with influences: it is a rather eclectic amalgamation of different styles and, all in all, it constitutes a search for an individual musical language. Of course, Bach and Beethoven dominate the scene, but also present are influences of Mahler, Prokofiev, Stravinsky, and even jazz music. This period ended rather abruptly: *Pravda's* "Muddle instead of music" and "Ballet falseness" removed the pretense of innocence and prompted the composer to look for other means of expressing his native sense of sincerity and earnestness.

³⁹ Yakubov, 5.

The middle period spans from 1936 (following the “urge” by the authorities to simplify the composer’s musical language) to 1953 (the year of Stalin’s death). During this period Shostakovich formulated the major principles of his style and created the greatest of his symphonies as well as a major part of his chamber music output. During this period his language became more tonally conservative, but his mastery of larger forms became unparalleled.

The late period spans from 1953 to 1975. The focus of this period was on chamber music and ten out of fifteen string quartets were created during that time. Shostakovich experimented with atonality and tone rows during this period, thus his musical language underwent a significant change once again. The final years are marked with creation of requiem-like works, which reflected the composer’s thoughts of life, its meaning, and its end in death. There is no observable decline in Shostakovich’s works in his final years despite his failing health and physical weakness. He was productive in his final years and such masterpieces as his incredible *Sonata for Viola and Piano*, op. 147, was written in 1975, the year of his death.

The tragedy of Shostakovich’s personal and artistic life was that he was living and composing in Soviet Russia at the time of Stalinist oppression and the years of terror, and was under an unbearable and constant pressure from the authorities’ unending attempts to control and modify his musical language. Shostakovich was forced to find ways of complying with the authoritarian regime, but simultaneously not to sacrifice his artistic views and integrity. Following his first denunciation in 1936, Shostakovich had to shift gears abruptly. Considering that the reason for the severe criticism was his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, Shostakovich decided to distance himself from opera.

He turned instead to less obvious, textless outlets – pure genres of symphony and string quartet. After his second denunciation in 1948 in Zhdanov's decree against formalism in Soviet music, Shostakovich was forced to find further compromise with the government and to become a Soviet representative at an international conference in the United States. This created a false picture of Shostakovich's affiliations, in turn, provoked a very negative reaction among American commentators, and resulted in a long-lasting wave of criticism of the composer in the West. Later, an even bigger compromise was required of Shostakovich. In order to become a Chief of the Composers' Union of the Russian Federation Shostakovich was forced to become a member of the Communist Party. He told his children afterwards, "I am dragged into the Party."⁴⁰ He was profoundly affected by that torture of his principles and depressed for a long time afterwards. His musical reactions, his outcry of a musical response was his autobiographical *Eighth String Quartet*. As mentioned above, one of the ways for Shostakovich to express in his music his deepest thoughts and emotions that were going against the accepted Soviet doctrines was to use double entendre and speak allegorically in his works of the middle and late periods.

⁴⁰ Meyer, 364.

Chapter Five

The Music of the Sonata

Leonid Nikolayev's death and Shostakovich's desire to pay tribute to his professor provided the inspiration for the *Second Piano Sonata*. Some details clearly came from earlier works by Shostakovich written during the time of his studies with Nikolayev, when the young composer was very much influenced by his mentor. In 1920, the fourteen-year-old Shostakovich made a serious attempt at a piano sonata; the result was a one-movement work in B minor. It was not preserved, but it is possible that the memory of this attempt of writing in sonata form influenced Shostakovich's choice of the key for the *Second Sonata*.

Unfortunately for the sonata, it was largely overshadowed by other works Shostakovich wrote during the same period of time. These were such monumental works as his "war symphonies" (Nos. 6-8) and his *Piano Trio in E minor*, op. 67. Most critics ignored the work at the time of its first performances. Although an excellent pianist himself, Shostakovich never did produce an extensive output for piano. Instead, he resorted to expressing himself through his favorite pair of genres—the symphony and the string quartet. The majority of Shostakovich's works for piano are miniatures. The only exceptions are the cycle of *24 Preludes and Fugues*, Op. 87, and the two piano sonatas. The *First Sonata*, op. 12, is a one-movement work which Shostakovich performed at the Chopin Competition. It is a spectacular piece which deserves much more attention than it gets; however, it belongs to a transitional period during which Shostakovich was searching for a new pianistic idiom. While Shostakovich wrote it roughly during the same

time as his original and highly successful *Fist Symphony*, the *First Sonata* was clearly influenced by Stravinsky and Prokofiev.⁴¹

Leonid Nikolayev's reaction to the *First Sonata* was full of sarcasm—in an apparent reference to the piece's motor aspect, he called it "Sonata for metronome with piano accompaniment."⁴² This quip then provides a plausible explanation for an oddity contained in the title of the *Second*. Shostakovich called it "Sonata dlya royalya," literally "Sonata for grand piano." In Russian, *royal*' is the specific term for "grand piano," while *fortepiano* is the more generic "piano," normally used for the designation of the instrument in things such as titles of pieces. In his barb, Nikolayev used the former, more specific form, hence it is very possible that Shostakovich would respond by using the same form of the term in the title of the *Second Sonata*. In fact, a cryptic pun of this sort would be entirely consistent with the composer's character: while in some sense another form of paying homage to his teacher it would also work as yet another coded message. In the liner notes for Vladimir Ashkenazy's recording, Eric Roseberry states that the *Second Sonata* "would seem to serve as a complete repudiation of its up-front, "avant-gardist" predecessor (the *Piano Sonata No. 1*). A very different musical language begins to take shape, a language based on establishing continuity with the rhetoric and with the forms of Beethoven, Schubert, Bruckner, Tchaikovsky and Mahler."⁴³

⁴¹ During Prokofiev's 1927 visit to the USSR, he taught several masterclasses for young composers. While in Leningrad, he worked with the up-and-coming Joseph Schillinger, whose composition he found complicated and uninteresting (Schillinger would soon leave for the US, where he would go on to devise the famed Shillinger System, the products of which included George Gershwin, Benny Goodman, and Glenn Miller). During the same class, the young Shostakovich showed him his *First Sonata*, which Prokofiev liked. Prokofiev's life-long friend, the composer Boris Asafyev made the smart-aleck remark that Prokofiev only liked the piece because it was so much like his own *Third Sonata*. For a fascinating account of this and other events, see Sergei Prokofiev, *Diaries: 1907-1933*, 3 vols. (Paris: Sprkfv, 2002).

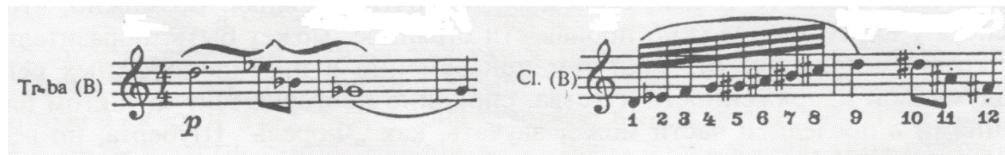
⁴² Meyer, 91.

⁴³ See Vladimir Ashkenazy, *Shostakovich: Piano Works*, liner notes by Eric Roseberry (London: Decca 000184602, 2000; compact disc).

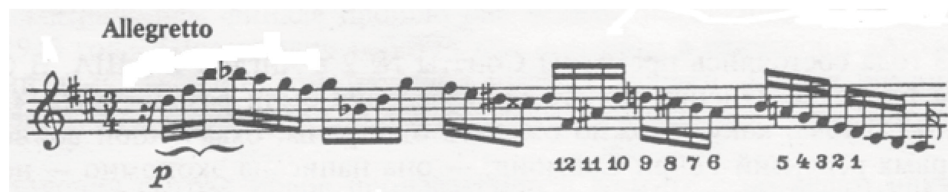
Second Sonata is Shostakovich's only real large scale solo piano work in multi-movement form and belongs to the middle period. Its three movements—Allegretto, Largo, and Moderato—can be construed to illustrate three major and very characteristic aspects of Shostakovich's musical language. These are the dramatic (first movement), lyrical simplicity (second movement), and tragic darkness (third movement). Importantly as well, due to certain difficulties of the musical language, every performer would do well to understand the basics of the structure (especially, pitch collection and form) in order to do the piece justice. Fundamental analytical considerations, among other things, will likely aide in such aspects as effective pacing, phrasing, and memory—not the least of all factors, in fact, a great challenge in the performance of this piece.

Borrowing

As mentioned above, some earlier materials served as inspiration for the sonata, and are even quoted in it. For example, as Manashir Yakubov pointed out, the melodic line of the opening of the first movement of the sonata is an exact copy of a couple of motives from the allegretto movement of the *Frist Symphony*, in their retrograde forms.⁴⁴



Example 5.1. Shostakovich, *First Symphony*.



Example 5.2. Shostakovich, *Second Piano Sonata*, Mvmt. I, Opening.

⁴⁴ Yakubov, 6-7.

Even more obvious is the relationship between some of the themes of the *First Symphony* and the second movement of the *Sonata*: compare the secondary material of the first movement of the *Symphony* with the very same in the second movement of the *Sonata*.



Example 5.3. Shostakovich, *First Symphony*, Mvmt. I, Secondary Material.⁴⁵



Example 5.4. Shostakovich, *Second Piano Sonata*, Mvmt. II, Secondary Material.

Also consider very similar passages within the respective primary areas of each of the movements.



Example 5.5. Shostakovich, *First Symphony*, mvmt. I, Primary Material.

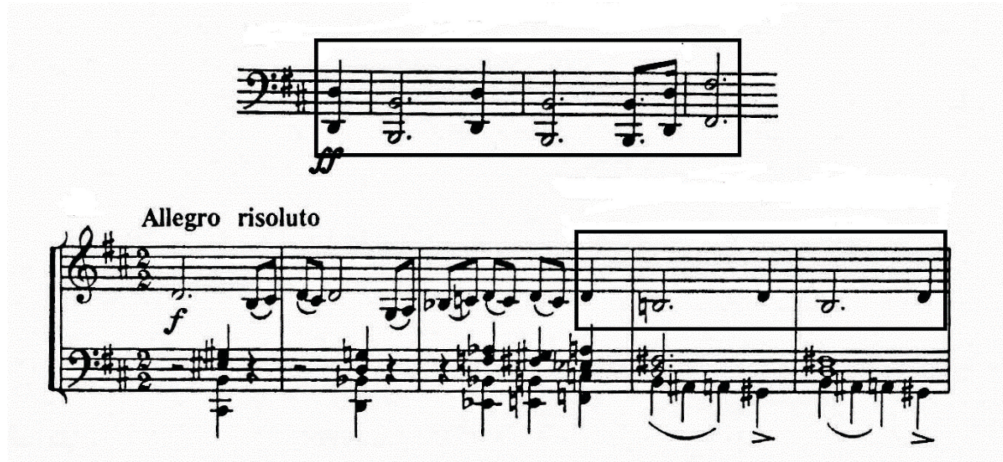


Example 5.6. Shostakovich, *Second Piano Sonata*, Mvmt. II, mm. 6-7.⁴⁶

Of even greater interest are Yakubov's findings with respect to Shostakovich's borrowing from Nikolayev's works. Compare Shostakovich's main theme with the theme of the Finale from Nikolayev's *Second String Quartet*.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.



Example 5.7. Shostakovich, *Second Piano Sonata*, Mvmt. I, Main Theme, and Nikolayev, *Second String Quartet*, Finale.⁴⁷

The motto⁴⁸ for the theme of Shostakovich's last movement can be traced back to two of Nikolayev's themes: the opening of No. 1 from *Three Piano Pieces*, and the head motive of the Fugue from his *Suite for Two Pianos*, which Shostakovich is known to have played.



Example 5.8. Nikolayev, *Three Piano Pieces*, Mvmt. I, and *Suite for Two Pianos*, Mvmt. IV, Fugue, and Shostakovich, *Second Piano Sonata*, Mvmt. III.⁴⁹

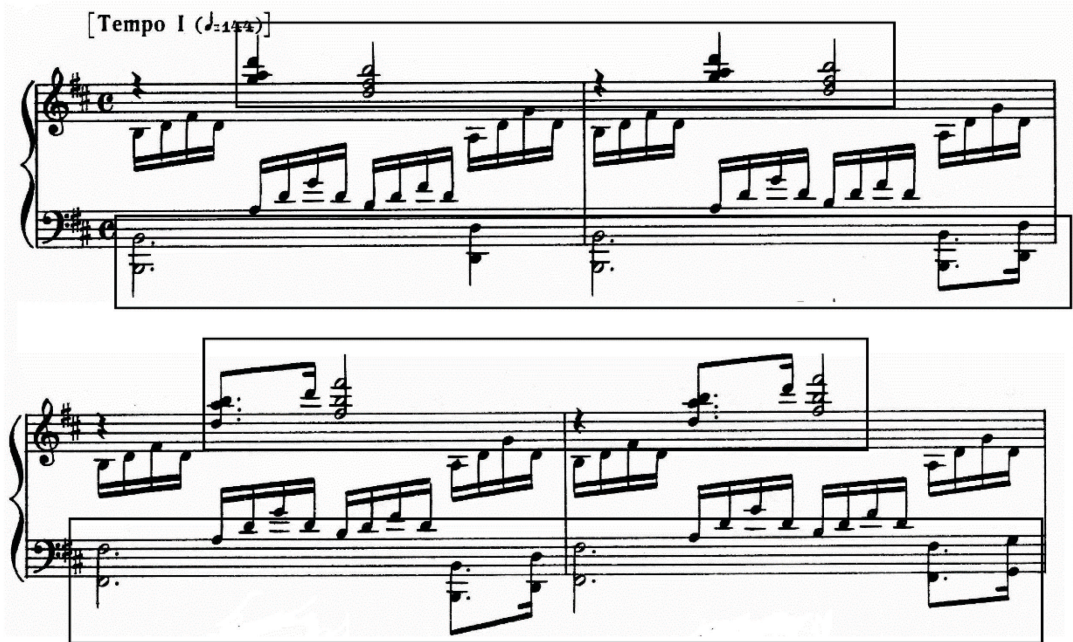
⁴⁷ Yakubov, 7.

⁴⁸ See the section below.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

First Movement–*Moderato*

The performer will do well to create strong characterizations for each of the themes in the first movement: a successful contrast will provide the necessary fuel for what is a lengthy development, and potentially carry the performance. This is a general truism for a plethora of sonata-form movements, but, given the pitch content, melodism, harmony, rhythmic regularity and relative size of phrases, this really comes to the fore in this movement. The first movement is in modified sonata form with all major divisions of the form present, although with a number of original twists. The exposition consists of two major contrasting sections—the primary unified thematic episode and the secondary thematic episode which also includes the closing theme. The development and the following recapitulation of the primary theme are amalgamated into a single structure which absorbs the primary thematic section. The secondary thematic section of the recapitulation merges the primary and the secondary theme material contrapuntally and creates the combined recapitulation of the two main thematic materials (see **Example 9**). As in a double fugue, each of the subjects must have an ostensible personality in order for their mixture to make any sense. The development section is the focal point of the movement as it spans over two thirds of the whole structure and explores to the maximum the conflict between the delicately introverted primary theme and its extroverted foil in the secondary area.



Example 5.9. Shostakovich, *Second Piano Sonata*, Mvmt. I, Recapitulation.

The first movement presents a gamut of unique stylistic elements such as the use of modes and unusual scales, shifting textures, distant key relations, and counterpoint. Again, this makes the material difficult to present to the public “in the moment” of performance: the more the performer nurtures his/her intuition with an intellectual understanding of the key acting elements, the better the chance s/he has of making the presentation coherent and convincing for the listener. A striking element of the first movement is a pervasive use of the diminished, or Locrian, tetrachord (Bb-A-G-F#), the four note modal figuration that covers a diminished fourth. It is rather obvious that this is just a transposition of the tetrachord Eb-D-C-B, or, when permuted, Shostakovich’s signature DSCH motive, D–S (Es=Eb)–C–H (H=B).⁵⁰

⁵⁰ As widely known, Shostakovich used his initials, Д. Ш., latinized in the German tradition as D. Sch., in order create a musical signature (in the vein of J. S. Bach and Robert Schumann), which he used with ever-increasing frequency from his late twenties on.

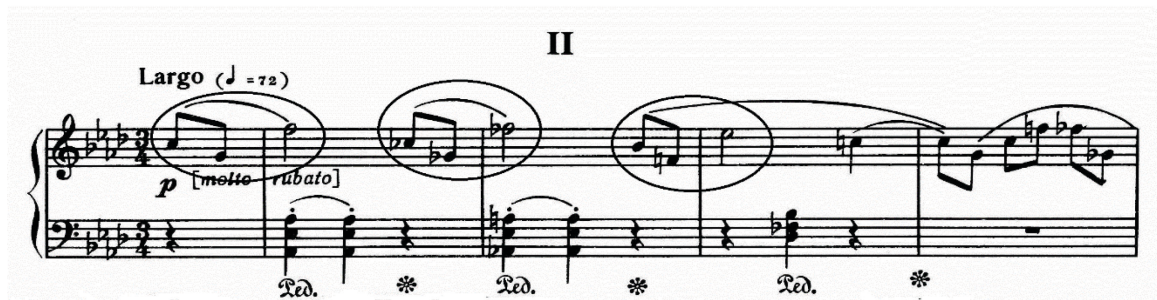
The Locrian tetrachord is just one instance of modality; the secondary theme is Lydian, and Phrygian mode is the governing pitch collection at beginning of the development section. This modal contrast serves as a substitute for the traditional major-minor or tonic-dominant opposition of conventional sonata form. Shostakovich uses distant key relations to create a deeper sense of tension and conflict in the movement. He uses the distant chromatic mediant relation of B minor and E flat major for the primary and secondary themes respectively to oppose the main themes not only texturally, but tonally as far as possible. Texture and color are begging for orchestration. Shostakovich uses the extremes of the keyboard, when the bottom and the top layers of texture are separated by five, six, even seven octaves, and the components of texture are situated in the marginal registers of the keyboard. This texture provides some much needed translucency to what is otherwise a densely contrapuntal pitch structure. The themes are often developed contrapuntally by imitation (recapitulation of the primary theme, see **Example 9**), stratification of contrasting ideas (combined recapitulation episode, see **Example 10**) and polyphonic methods of the motivic development. It seems that horizontal aspect (polyphony) is more important in this movement than the vertical one (harmony).

Example 5.10. Shostakovich, *Second Piano Sonata*, Mvmt. I, Middle of Recap.

Second Movement–*Largo*

The second movement is a tripartite structure with a modified recapitulation, thus echoing the first movement and fitting well with the same quasi-sonata, rounded-binary family of forms. The tonal scheme, by virtue of also employing a chromatic mediant relationship (Ab Major–C Major–Ab Major), brings the two movements even closer together. A cursory look suggests the influence of the Second Viennese School: Schoenberg's op. 11, no. 2, immediately comes to mind, as does his op. 19, no. 2, with its staccato thirds. The main motivic gesture of the second movement consists of just three notes: a descending fourth followed by an ascending seventh (C–G–F). This is very similar to Alban Berg's iconic G–D–F# motive (*Piano Sonata* and *Violin Concerto*, most famously), especially given that it appears as an epigraphic motto (in the opening, without supporting harmony) and in the same octave: the Second Viennese conjecture is thus strengthened. Certainly, this music would have been strictly forbidden in the USSR in the 1940s. However, during the freer 1920s and under the guidance of the open-minded Nikolayev, Shostakovich did come into contact with the latest European (and even American) music had to offer. In any case, the head-motive creates an angular, disjointed melodic contour, which was a favorite of Shostakovich. The main theme consists of laconic motives, short melodic contours disconnected by rests; these chords gradually grow into longer phrases and periods. Much like Beethoven, Shostakovich was not perceived as a great melodist, but rather, a developer of melodic material; however his melodies are characterized with introverted tenderness and delicacy. These disjointed motivic gestures, unresolved dissonances, and the extremely soft dynamic palette lend the

movement a haunting quality, which requires a strong emotional response and much energy to perform.



Example 5.11. Shostakovich, *Second Piano Sonata*, Mvmt. II, Opening.

The second movement also echoes the first one in its means of thematic development. The avoidance of cadences creates an effect of unstable, endless expansion—this is another challenge of the performer, calling for an ever greater expenditure of energy as the “line” lengthens while the texture is mind-numbingly sparse. The middle section (*Meno mosso*) changes textures although the atmosphere and character stay similar to the first section of the movement. The melody achieves a degree of smoothness, more *legato* in nature. As often, Shostakovich brings the main theme back in varied form as the movement heads to its recapitulation. The outer sections also exhibit another one of his favorite tools: contrapuntal juxtaposition of the main motivic idea in various textural layers (Heinrich Schenker should have been proud!). Canon is the perfect means for his kind of motivic transformation and that is what the composer uses here. The closing episode drags the main theme further into the depths of the soft dynamic underworld. Together with extended deep pedaling and delicate melismatic passages, the quality of sound becomes almost impressionist.

Third Movement–Variations

The finale is a tour de force. It is a passacaglia-like set of eleven variations on an extended theme. The sheer amount of invention on which Shostakovich calls in this movement deserves attention, as does the compositional technique in the theme and in *every* variation—performing this without a sense of how it is built makes for a truncated experience.

The image displays a musical score for the opening of the Third Movement of Shostakovich's Second Piano Sonata. The score is written for piano and features a single melodic line in the right hand, with a bass line in the left hand. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into several sections, each with specific annotations:

- Phrase 1 - Exposition:** This section begins with an *Epigraph* marked *p*. It includes a *tenuto* marking and two *Short* phrases. The section concludes with a *Dim. octave* marking.
- Phrase 2 - Development:** This section starts at measure 7 and includes a *Long* phrase and a *Cross motive*. A *Question mark* is placed above a specific note. The section ends with a *pp* marking.
- False Recap in F major:** This section begins at measure 14 and features a *cresc.* (crescendo) marking.
- Phrase 3 - Recapitulation:** This section starts at measure 19 and includes a *p* marking and a *pp* marking.
- Epilogue:** This section begins at measure 25 and includes a *cresc.* marking, a *Minor ninth* interval, and a *p* marking.

Example 5.12. Shostakovich, *Second Piano Sonata*, Mvmt. III, Opening (Theme).

The theme is presented in stark monophony, hence intensifying the austerity of the chaconne/passacaglia influence: it resembles an unaccompanied instrumental piece of the Baroque period and Bach's *Chaconne in D minor*, BWV 1004, from the *Second Violin Partita* immediately comes to mind. Also obvious is the fact that the theme resembles a fugue subject.⁵¹ After all, Shostakovich did intend to include a fugue in the sonata cycle.⁵² The opening gesture presents two motivic cells which Shostakovich uses for motivic and polyphonic development. The first is triadic and the second a descending diminished (Locrian) tetrachord. The musical code is fairly transparent: the B minor triad (F#-B-D) traditionally represents lament, while the altered tetrachord Eb-D-C#-B is likely a variant of Shostakovich's signature D-Eb-C-B. The descending chromaticism can be construed as another nod to the classic lament as well as a representation of the way the mourning process alters the individual; in this regard, it is significant that Shostakovich chooses to spell the note as an Eb rather than a D#, which would have made more sense tonally (and this theme, while highly chromatic, is very tonal). What we get is the composer's self-portrait, while grieving: B minor = "mourning" and Eb-D-C#-B = "altered Shostakovich." Also underscoring the quality of lament are the excruciating ascending diminished octave (B-Bb) in m. 6, the cross motive (B-C-A#-B, almost the classic B-A-C-H) in m. 7, their developed and ever more painful variant with the ascending minor ninth (B-C) in. 28, and the augmented variant of the opening motive (F#-C- Eb), which outlines the diminished seventh chord in mm. 13-14. Finally of note is

⁵¹ Obviously, Shostakovich was greatly and profoundly influenced by Bach. Bach's influence is especially readily apparent in Shostakovich's writing for piano. Even during the early period, the *Twenty-Four Preludes*, op. 34 (1933), while overtly related to Chopin's op. 28 (arranged in the same fashion, around the circle of fifths with alternating relative keys: C major–A minor–G major–E minor, etc.), ultimately go back to Bach. Shostakovich used the same idea (and same order!) for the *Twenty-Four Preludes and Fugues* of his op. 87—an homage, inspired by the 200th anniversary of Bach's death.

⁵² See above.

the fact that both of the important motivic cells, as well as the monophonic fugue-subject type of texture hark back to the opening of the first movement. Here the ascending B minor chord is in its first inversion (D-F#-B), rather than the second, as it appears in the theme of the finale (F#-B-D). This links to another chromatic tetrachord by a descending half-step (B-Bb), while in the finale the half-step ascends (D-Eb). B-Bb possibly foreshadows the painful diminished octave in m. 6 of the finale. The tetrachord in question, Bb-A-G-F#, is indeed an exact transposition of the signature D-Eb-C-B, thereby granting further significance to the alteration in the finale: the location is now correct, therefore, more truthful, but the “self” is altered.

The theme consists of three phrases: mm. 1-9, mm. 10-22, mm. 23-30, respectively. Arnold Schoenberg famously coined the term “developing variation” when describing an important aspect of the music of Brahms. Curiously, the same would be very pertinent to the relationship of the three phrases in Shostakovich’s theme. Following an epigraphic ascending fifth and fourth of in the opening, the phrase is presented in classic sentence form (the Schoenbergian *Satz*): short (two bars)—short (same two bars)—long (four bars, coherently related, but different material, leading to an apparent resolution, but with a tag, resembling a question mark). The second phrase is both a variation on and a departure from the first. It displays a sequential development of the main motive which transforms both variants of the diminished tetrachords mentioned above. The last three and a half bars of this development (mm. 20-22) are nothing but a classic false recapitulation, importantly in the key of F major, a tritone away from the home key of B minor. This leads to the third phrase, which is really a varied recap of the first phrase. It climaxes on the minor ninth in mm. 27-28 which is ever more painful. It appears without

the epigraph, since the false recap subsumes it, but with a descending F#-B-F#-B epilogue (and epitaph?), which eschews the question mark and provides the final resolution. Thus, the theme presents in microcosm all of the formal concepts that Shostakovich will go on to “compose out” (yes, a nod to Schenker yet again) in this movement: the fugue, the variation, and the sonata principle.

The first two variations form the Exposition of the variation cycle. Mm. 31-60 are the first variation, in which Shostakovich leaves the theme entirely intact in the soprano voice, which he supplies with a contrapuntal accompaniment in the lower voices. The texture is similar to the Renaissance *cantus firmus* (CF) technique, where the counterpoint is not strictly imitative, but much of the texture is motivically drawn from the CF.⁵³ The CF moves to what is a de-facto tenor voice for Var. II (mm. 61-90). Meanwhile, in keeping with the chaconne/passacaglia tradition, Shostakovich is also invoking the principle of division-variations by providing the CF with an accompaniment in triplets (dividing the quarter notes of the accompaniment from Var. I). Interestingly, the triplets appear at times above the theme and at times below, thus implying more than two voices and once again alluding to the D minor *Chaconne* for violin.⁵⁴

In Vars. III-VII (mm. 91 to 379), Shostakovich plays with the motives of the theme, explores a number of its harmonic implications, changes keys, textures, and characters—all features of the Development section of the sonata-allegro form. Var. III offers the first alterations to the melody of the theme. While the pitch contours are left largely intact, the

⁵³ The ascending fourths in tenor in mm. 33-35 are clearly mimicking the *cantus firmus* from just a couple of beats before; the bass in m. 32 is a rhythmically augmented and tonally “normalized” version of the descending tetrachord, etc.

⁵⁴ The instrument (violin) does not allow for prolonged multi-voice texture, but Bach masterfully employs various techniques of implied polyphony in order to circumvent this natural problem.

intervals are not observed strictly and the rhythm is converted to a stream of eighth notes. The experience, however, is nothing like that of a homogenized pattern: once again, implied polyphony (for large stretches, no two notes sound simultaneously), now deftly woven into the unified rhythmic fabric, provides the necessary extra dimensions. Also representing a shift away from the theme and the first two variations is the indication of *piu mosso*, while the *sempre staccato* articulation lends the character a somewhat lighter, *scherzando* quality. Midway through the variation, the melodic material moves to the bass, while the chords in the right hand begin to resemble an operatic chorus, its remarks mimicking those of the soloist. This is precisely what makes the transition to the next variation (Var. IV, mm. 129-62) smoother: the variation is in a chorale-like, homophonic, nearly homorhythmic texture, with the soprano voice closely resembling the theme, as *Tempo I* returns. The density of the chordal texture carefully follows the melodic contour. As the melody gradually expands its range and begins to reach the higher notes of the melodic contour, the texture follows suite and shifts to a higher density in order to support the changes in the melody. The higher notes are supported by chords voiced in larger intervals and wider range. Var. IV is the first in which meter and tempo do not stay monochromatic; in fact, they change frequently. In a way, this mimics the *tempo rubato* and changing meter of the opening of the second movement.

The last four bars of Var. IV form an extension which modulates to F (diametrically opposed to the overall tonal center B), thus following on the promise inherent in mm. 20-22 of the theme. The *scherzando* quality of the staccato head-motive in rhythmic diminution (in eighths) and the accent on A-natural (mm. 164 and 166) make the designation of mode (minor vs. major) rather problematic, even though the pitch

content of the soprano voice is almost a literal transposition of the theme. This paves the way for more experimentation and modulation—major, minor, chromatic, octatonic, whole-tone, Phrygian, and Lydian fragments move by kaleidoscopically, as do tonal centers: the tonal center momentarily switches to F#, E, G, C, C#, and finishes in D. For this and the following two variations Shostakovich abandons the key signature in favor of accidentals. Only the episode in C settles in for any length of time (in mm. 200-17), and is basically in the major mode. The head motive is rhythmically augmented back to the same note lengths as in the theme (quarters and halves) and appears in a slightly altered form in the tenor while the bass augments the opening motive even further (dotted halves). This double statement of the theme is also characterized with strong dynamics, wider intervallic leaps and overall texture (fanfare-like triadic motive plus a dense accompaniment with the upper voices in doubled sixths), which echoes those symphonies by Shostakovich that feature brass solos, notably the *Fifth*, *Seventh*, and *Eighth*. This screaming C major is hysterically powerful and remarkably effective; it also represents the polar opposite of the austere slow and soft pointillism of the theme, which, counterintuitively, contains the seeds of the culmination on the F-C axis within itself; finally, this is still in keeping with both the classic variation form (contrasting middle variation, although this is not an easy fit for the traditional *maggiore* variation) and sonata form (see especially, the huge culmination before the “new theme” in the development of the first movement of Beethoven’s *Eroica*).

Var. VI (mm. 236–91) is a canon at the diminished octave (!), in what is another reference to Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, BWV 988. The right hand is in G (also from *Goldberg*), while the left is in G#: the two engage in a catch-me-if-you-can, while

exchanging strictly monophonic four-note riffs. Here also begins a dotted rhythmic pattern which forms the background for the rest of the variation cycle (except for the coda and only one bar in Var. IX). This persistent rhythm becomes a somewhat disturbing *idée fixe*. In Var. VII (mm. 292–378), the *Poco meno mosso* episode, it turns into a chilling *basso ostinato* of fourths (A-D), sevenths (A-G) and ninths (A-Bb)—all intervals coming back to the tolling of the low A. Midway through the variation, another bass voice enters below the ostinato: this is the subject in E major, inverted and in augmentation (halves and whole notes). There is also another structural tritone: E Major (root) alternate with Bb major (second inversion) chords. The impact of this detour into the major is arresting, and yet again, harks back to similar passages in other music by Shostakovich (slow movements of the *Fifth Symphony* and the *Second Piano Trio*): the effect is eerie but *pre-cathartic*, and brings some very necessary light to the tragic atmosphere of finale.

The pedal on the low C octave which hangs below for eight measures at the end of Var. VII turns out to be the Phrygian flat II (also think the Neapolitan), as a quick F#-B in the bass brings us back to the original key for what is the beginning of the Recapitulation. Var. VIII is a French overture in spirit; the specific rhythmic pattern definitely points to the highly distinctive Var. VII from Schumann's *Symphonic Etudes*, op. 13. The theme is in the bass and in a slow tempo (*Adagio*), which also helps to recreate the passacaglia character. This paves the way to the sublimely serene B major of Var. IX, which creates an emotional arch with the E Major episode of Var. VII and consists of similar elements: ostinato on the dominant of B minor/B major in bass and the B Major chords in the high register. However, this softer and lighter interlude is fleeting and the inevitable tragedy of

reality returns with the chorale of Var. X. This is a flashback to Var. IV, albeit truncated to a mere six measures of the original.

In another overt nod to the *Goldberg Variations*, with their return to the theme at the end, Shostakovich brings his theme back in the coda (Var. XI). He begins it right where Var. X had left off: at the “development” of the theme. The dirge-like tune is presented twice in the low register with sixteenth note arpeggios in the right hand (simplified harmonies, mostly triadic). In another recapitulative touch, much like Var. II, the tune and the accompaniment exchange registers before traveling back for two repetitions of the lower chromatic tetrachord (Eb-D-C#-B), which come to a full stop on F#. This is the final dominant, which becomes the foundation for the last repetition of the lower tetrachord. The finale ends with the tonic chords on *pianissimo* in the lowest register of the piano. At the curtain, the mood of the finale is that of a complete loss of hope and acceptance of that which is most tragic.

THEME	Theme mm. 1-30 <i>Two tetrachords: E-flat-D-C-sharp-B, B-flat-A-G-F-sharp</i>	
	mm. 1-9 <i>B minor</i> Exposition (A)	mm. 10-22 <i>Modulation to F major</i> Development (B)
		mm. 23-30 <i>Climax on minor ninth (B-C) and return to B minor</i> Recapitulation (A')
EXPOSITION	Var. I mm. 31-60 <i>Theme in the original form + walking bass accompaniment</i>	Var. II mm. 61-90 <i>Variation on rhythm and texture; accompaniment. in triplets</i> <i>Theme intact, passed from hand to hand</i>
DEVELOPMENT	Var. III mm. 91-128 <i>First scherzando episode; change of character; theme changed significantly for the first time</i>	Var. IV mm. 129-62 <i>Return to tempo primo; chorale texture; last four measures modulate to F</i>
	Var. V mm. 163-235 <i>Second scherzando episode; quickly shifting keys strong dynamic, wide leaps, fanfare-like motive, C major episode; theme in double augmentation in bass finish in D</i>	Var. VI mm. 236-91 <i>Canon at the diminished octave (G-G#); dotted rhythm begins</i>
	Var. VII mm. 292-378 <i>Dotted ostinato (A-D, A-G, A-Bb); "frozen" quality; E major-Bb flat major; inverted theme in augmentation in bass and soprano; long low C octave becomes flat 2</i>	
RECAPITULATION	Var. VIII mm. 379-407 <i>B minor returns, passacaglia is back; Schumann homage</i>	Var. IX mm. 408-30 <i>Serene B major– arch to Var. VII; double-dotted rhythm continues</i>
	Var. X mm. 431-44 <i>Chorale–arch to Var. IV; truncated, first phrase of the theme</i>	Var. XI (Coda) mm. 445-74 <i>Picking up from the "development" phrase of the theme; simple arpeggiated accompaniment in easy sixteenths as theme moves from bass to soprano and back; full stop on low F#; low end</i>

Figure 5.2. Sonata Form Implications in the Last Movement.

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